DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 393 084 CS 012 397

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TITLE College Peer Tutor Awareness of Reading Problems.
PUB DATE May 96
NOTE 32p.; M.A. Project, Kean College of New Jersey.
PUB TYPE Dissertations/Theses - Masters Theses (042) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Students; Higher Education; *Peer Teaching; *Reading Comprehension; *Reading Difficulties; Reading Improvement; Reading Instruction; Reading Skills; *Tutoring; *Tutors
IDENTIFIERS Tutoring Attitude Questionnaire; Tutor Role; Union County College NJ

ABSTRACT

A study examined the extent of peer tutors' awareness of reading comprehension problems as a source of academic difficulties. The study, conducted in the spring of 1996, used a questionnaire to determine some of the reading habits of peer tutors and their perceptions of reading comprehension difficulties among students they tutored. The questionnaire was distributed to 30 peer tutors employed by Union County College of Cranford, New Jersey. Results indicated that more than half of the peer tutors believe that they have tutored students who have reading problems, and perceive reading comprehension difficulties as a regularly encountered problem. However, none of the tutors, regardless of their subject, believe that they encounter reading difficulty as a frequent and severe problem. Findings revealed significant tutor awareness of the importance of reading skills both to themselves and to the students they tutor. (Contains 4 tables of data; 12 references, a reading survey and survey response totals are appended as well as related research.) (CR)

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College Peer Tutor Awareness of Reading Problems

by

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Accepted
4/3/96
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In partial fulfillment of the Master of Arts
Program
Kean College of New Jersey
May, 1996

CS012397

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ABSTRACT

This is a study of thirty peer tutors employed by Union County College of Cranford, New Jersey in the Spring of 1996. A Questionnaire was distributed to the tutors to determine some of their reading habits, and their perceptions of reading comprehension difficulties among the students they tutored. The purpose of the study was to determine the extent of peer tutor awareness of reading comprehension problems as a source of academic difficulties. At the conclusion of the study the data indicated a high awareness of reading problems by the peer tutors.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to thank the staff members of the Academic Learning Centers for their assistance in gathering data for this study. I would also like to thank Dr. Albert J. Mazurkiewicz, Chairperson of Communication Sciences at Kean College of New Jersey, for his guidance in the preparation of this study.

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The Academic Learning Center (ALC) at Union County College in Cranford, New Jersey was designed as a non-appointment, walk-in tutoring service that provides peer tutoring not only to underprepared students, but to all students requesting help in a wide variety of subject areas. The peer tutors offer help in both developmental and upper-level courses, both of which have different literacy requirements. Peer tutors who have taken upper-level courses will have a knowledge of the reading skills necessary for those courses that can benefit the students they tutor. According to Mohr (1991), tutors often explain subject material from a practical level and add their own experiences to the tutoring session. Tips on how the tutor handled reading and comprehending difficult textbook material should be part of the practical information imparted to the student. This type of student-tutor interaction can be encouraged by increasing peer tutor awareness of the importance of reading skills in academic success. Training

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tutors to understand the reading process can increase their effectiveness (Matthews 1993).

In a study of literacy needs at community colleges, Roueche (1990) states that "Faculty teaching introductory courses knew little about the language requirements and applications in career-related and other academic courses." In these circumstances, tutors who understand the reading process will be better equipped to help students who may have already received developmental reading help, but are struggling with the more demanding literacy requirements of higher level academic courses. Matthews (1993) points out the interactive nature of both tutoring and reading. He defines reading as a, "...Participatory process in which readers make use of what they already know..." Understanding reading as an interaction between the words on the page and the reader's prior knowledge enables the tutor to better understand how the tutoring session can help the student relate what they are learning to what they already know. Matthews makes it clear that peer tutors cannot be expected

to become expert in reading theory, but by understanding what makes an effective reader, the tutor could better help the student be an effective learner.

In a study of peer tutoring issues and concerns, Zaretsky (1989) points out that there is evidence that both tutor and tutee benefit academically, and gain self-confidence, through the tutoring interaction. Training tutors to understand the reading process can enable them to not only help other students develop strategies to deal with the reading requirements of their courses, but also to refer them to other academic resources.

The available literature, however, provides little or no information concerning how aware peer tutors at community college learning centers are of reading difficulties and comprehension strategies both in their own reading, and among the students they tutor. Such information would provide the basis for tutor training and should provide for better instruction.

HYPOTHESIS

It was hypothezied that peer tutors at the Academic Learning centers have little awareness of possible reading comprehension difficulties among the students they work with

PROCEDURES

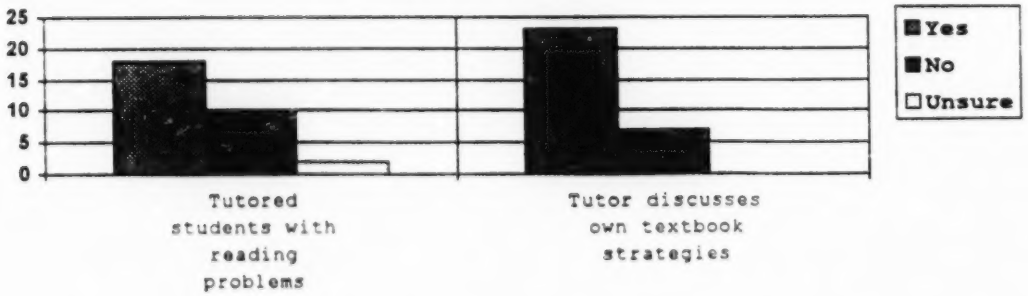
The reading questionnaire was distributed to all subject peer tutors employed by the college at the Academic Learning Centers on the Plainfield, Elizabeth and Cranford campuses. Peer tutors who provided help in the computer facilities were excluded from the sample because they offer mainly technical assistance in wordprocessing and computer aided instructional materials. Also excluded were tutors with less than one full semester of tutoring experience at the ALC. The questionnaire consisted of two parts of four questions each. Part one focused on the peer tutor's perceptions of the reading skills of the students they worked with. Part two focused on

the reading habits of the tutors themselves. The respondents were not asked to put their names on the questionnaire and were directed to fill in only the subjects they tutored and the number of semesters they had been employed. The survey was distributed and collected by the supervisor of each ALC facility.

RESULTS

Thirty peer tutors in the subject areas of American Sign Language, Biology, English, Mathematics, Physics, and Psychology, responded to the questionnaire. Table one illustrates graphically the total results for all respondents in all subject areas for part one, questions one and two.

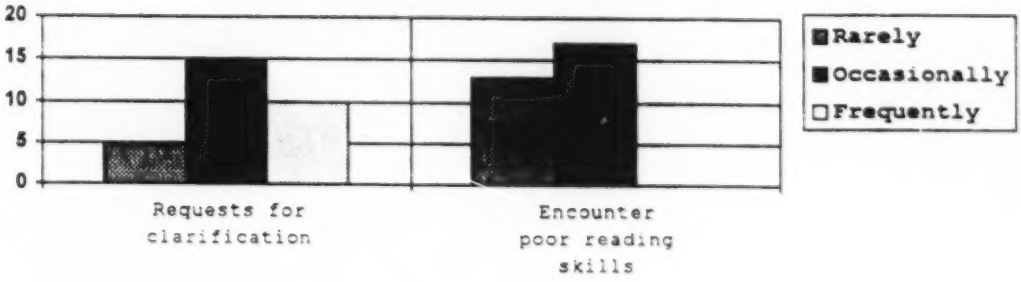
Table I - Part 1
Survey Questions 1 & 2



On question one, more than half of the respondents (56.5%) indicated that they had tutored students with reading problems. On question two, a majority of respondents (76.5%) indicated that they discussed their own textbook reading strategies with the students.

Table two illustrates the total results for all respondents to questions three and four of part one.

Table II - Part 1
Survey Questions 3 & 4

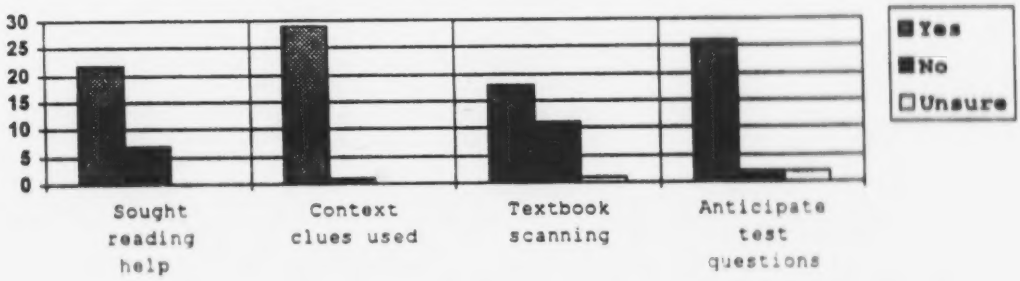


On question three of part one, fifteen of the tutors responded that they are "occasionally" asked to clarify textbook material. A substantial percentage of the tutors (33.5%) responded that they were "frequently" asked to clarify textbook

material. Only five of the thirty tutors gave a "rarely" response for question three. Apparently, the peer tutors are asked to clarify textbook material on a fairly frequent basis. On question four of part one, over half the tutors (56.5%) responded that they regularly encountered students with poor reading skills.

In part two of the questionnaire, the majority of the tutors responded "yes" to all four questions as is illustrated in table three.

Table III - Part 2
Survey Questions 1-4



Somewhat more of the tutors (40%) responded "no" to question three, which dealt with textbook scanning skills. There were only three "unsure" responses in all of part two; one response on question three and two on question four.

Table four illustrates the survey responses

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broken down by subject area for each question. Not surprisingly, table four indicates that a "yes" response to question one was unanimous in the areas of English and Psychology. In the area of Mathematics only two out of nine respondents answered "yes" to question one. Again, the response was unanimous to this question in the areas of English and Psychology. In contrast to the responses to question one, in the second question, six out of nine Math tutors responded that they do discuss textbook reading strategies.

As was expected, the majority of the Mathematics tutors considered poor reading skills among the students they worked with a "minor" problem. None of the respondents considered poor reading skills a "severe" problem.

On part two of the survey, results were generally consistent among tutors in all subject areas except for question three of part II. On this question, six out of eight mathematics tutors indicated that they did not scan a text before reading it more carefully.

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Table IV
Questionnaire Response by Subject Area

Subject Area	No. of respondents	No. responses for each question	
American Sign Language	3	Part I	Part II
		1) 0-3-0	1) 1-2-0
		2) 0-3-0	2) 3-0-0
		3) 2-1-0	3) 1-1-1
		4) 3-0-0	4) 3-0-0
Biology	8	1) 5-3-0	1) 7-1-0
		2) 8-0-0	2) 7-2-0
		3) 0-7-1	3) 6-2-0
		4) 3-5-0	4) 7-0-1
English	5	1) 5-0-0	1) 4-1-0
		2) 5-0-0	2) 5-0-0
		3) 0-3-2	3) 3-2-0
		4) 1-4-0	4) 5-0-0
Mathematics	9	1) 2-6-1	1) 8-1-0
		2) 6-3-0	2) 9-0-0
		3) 2-2-5	3) 3-6-0
		4) 6-3-0	4) 5-3-1
Physics	1	1) 1-0-0	1) 1-0-0
		2) 1-0-0	2) 1-0-0
		3) 0-1 0	3) 1-0-0
		4) 0-1-0	4) 1-0-0
Psychology	4	1) 4-0-0	1) 2-2-0
		2) 4-0-0	2) 4-0-0
		3) 1-1-2	3) 3-1-0
		4) 0-4-0	4) 4-0-0

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

It is apparent from the results of the questionnaire that more than half of the peer tutors surveyed believe they have tutored students who have reading problems, and perceive reading comprehension difficulties as a regularly encountered problem. These results do not support the hypothesis that peer tutors at Union County College are unaware of their student's reading difficulties. Not surprisingly, perceptions of student reading varied with the subjects tutored. However, none of the tutors, regardless of their subject, believe that they encounter reading difficulty as a frequent and severe problem. The results of the survey generally show that most of the tutors deal regularly with reading problems, and have attempted to improve their own reading while at college, acquiring an understanding of comprehension strategies such as the use of context clues to determine the meaning of unknown words.

Although a majority of the tutors indicated that they discuss their own reading strategies,

two thirds of the respondents indicated they were asked to clarify textbook material only occasionally or rarely. A possible reason for this response is that a student may ask a question about course material without specifically alluding to the textbook. The tutor may then respond by referring to the textbook to clarify a point, and in doing so, discuss and impart some of his or her own reading strategies.

This study has shown a significant tutor awareness of the importance of reading skills both to themselves and to the students they tutor at Union County College. Although a discussion of specific tutor training methods is beyond the scope of this study, appropriate tutor training in understanding the reading process could be valuable in enhancing a practical interaction between tutor and student at Union County College. Given the variety of tutoring services offered at colleges and universities across the United States, it may not always be practical to train tutors specifically in reading theory, but the encouragement of tutors in all subject areas to

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impart some of the reading strategies they have acquired as successful students is a way to increase tutor effectiveness.

College Peer Tutors: Related Research

Although there is limited information dealing specifically with peer tutor perceptions of reading problems among community college students, a substantial number of studies have dealt with areas such as college level reading issues, tutors in college reading laboratories, tutor training, and tutor supervision. These articles have helped place the topic of this study in perspective.

In the area of college reading issues and problems, Roueche (1982), provides an overview of the literacy problems faced by community colleges. He identifies the roots of the problem as the "open door" enrollment policy adopted by many community colleges that has allowed students to enroll whose literacy level is not adequate for college work. Community colleges have dealt with this situation through placement testing of incoming students into appropriate remedial courses. Roueche points out that a localization or isolation of basic skills instruction has taken place within the curriculum due to this situation. Roueche also notes a discrepancy between the reading skills taught in developmental courses and

the skills actually required in the regular college curriculum. He states that teachers rarely interact with each other regarding the literacy requirements of their courses. Peer tutoring is one of the elements that Roueche identifies as part of a successful developmental program.

Yevoli (1993) offers a concise historical overview of corrective strategies in reading for at-risk community college students from the 1940's up to the 1980's. She also describes current efforts and the future needs of at-risk community college students in reading. The article describes several reading programs and effective strategies. One of the programs Yevoli mentions was developed in 1965 by Savin Cohen of New York City Community College. One of the guiding principles of Cohen's program is that a student's reading improvement comes about through an integration of reading with significant experiences in the student's life, and that developing effective reading comprehension skills should be encouraged across the curriculum. Peer

tutoring can play a role in encouraging the integration of basic skills improvement and college course work. Cheek (1983) also advocates a broad-based approach to reading instruction, and offers a contemporary definition of college reading that includes student input, content area reading and student tutoring. A study by Stahl, Simpson, and Hayes (1991) describes 13 strategies and methods for college reading and learning programs. The authors include such techniques as using writing to improve reading, and methods to broaden conceptual knowledge.

A study by Lambert, Taylor, and Flynn (1991) analyzes the characteristics of students required to enroll in the college reading program at the University of Arkansas during its first year of implementation. The study mentions the need for more complex college remedial programs which would meet the needs of students with a variety of learning styles. Peer tutors sensitive to reading difficulties could contribute to this need by

offering informal reading support to students struggling with academic course work even after they have completed developmental courses.

Zaretsky (1989), in a study of tutoring in colleges throughout New York State, describes tutoring as a cost effective way to improve student retention. Zaretsky traces the concept of tutoring back to the ancient Greeks and the Socratic method. Interestingly, Zaretsky traces the roots of the contemporary conception of peer tutoring to a reaction by colleges to problems of student retention resulting from large impersonal lecture classes. To help students struggling with course material, the colleges turned first to graduate students to organize large group tutoring sessions for undergraduates, then to peer tutors as a cost effective alternative. In this instance, peer tutors served as a point of personal contact in a large impersonal university setting.

Some colleges have dealt with the improvement of reading skills by establishing reading laboratories which are staffed with student

tutors. Usage of laboratory facilities is usually a mandatory part of a remedial reading course with students working independently. At many facilities, the peer tutor's role is mainly to offer prescriptive help and to direct the student to learning materials. Yuthas (1971) describes a tutorial reading program at Metropolitan State College at Denver, Colorado. The laboratory was established because of faculty concern with the large number of remedial courses being offered. The program consisted of a reading laboratory supervised by student tutors who provided learning materials and led discussions in areas such as study skills and note taking. Yuthas concludes that at Metropolitan State College there is a correlation between participation in the reading program and persistence in college. In a study of the impact of peer tutoring on student performance on the Nelson Denny Reading Test, Anderson and Smith (1987) describe a reading laboratory at a small state college in Maryland. The peer tutors were trained using an integrated learning model developed by Schmelzer and Brozo (1985). The

model is based on the importance of tutors acquiring a basic understanding of the learning process, and consists of five phases of preparation, input, processing, storage, and output. Tutor training included initial workshop sessions and weekly ongoing training.

It is apparent that improving tutor effectiveness by increasing their awareness of the learning process, can form the basis of tutor training and supervision. Matthews (1993) describes an approach to training tutors by helping them to understand interactive reading strategies and applying them to the student-tutor interaction. Matthews believes that this type of training will result in a less directive, more cooperative tutoring session. Matthews advocates a view of the tutor as a facilitator who encourages self-motivated learning, rather than a passive answer-giver. Matthews also describes a tutoring strategy called TEST which is essentially a series of whole Language reading steps applied to the tutoring session. Mohr (1991) examines peer tutoring training at community colleges and

reviews literature on the topic. The article also contains a report on a survey of peer tutor attitudes at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas. In a review of literature about tutor rationale, the author mentions that it is beneficial for the tutor to add his or her own experiences to explanations of the subject material. Effective supervision of tutors should encourage this type of practical interaction between tutor and student.

What type of tutor supervision is used depends on the subject areas involved and the nature of the tutoring facility. For example, Moran (1976) notes that tutors working with remedial reading students may require more extensive training and closer supervision than tutors working in other subject areas. Moran's article also offers some fundamental quidelines regarding the types of subjects most conducive to peer tutoring, attributes of an effective tutor, and tips for effective tutor training. Sakley (1980) offers a concise description of the hiring, supervision and training of peer tutors in a

college developmental reading program. Sakley emphasizes that tutor supervision should be cooperative, and that tutors should be encouraged to experiment with approaches and materials. This type of supervisory approach may be effective in a situation in which tutors are to recognize and react to the reading problems of the students they work with.

From the studies mentioned in this article it is apparent that colleges and universities throughout the country vary widely in their approaches to peer tutoring services and how they are designed supplement course work. Clearly, more information is needed to determine the most effective ways to train peer tutors to recognize reading and study skills problems. In a situation of this type, future studies can be a valuable sharing of methods and experiences.

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APPENDIX A
PEER TUTOR READING SURVEY
RESPONSE TOTALS

Number of tutors responding to survey: 30

Part 1

1. Have you tutored students who, in your opinion, were having difficulty with course work caused by problems in reading comprehension?
   Total responses: Yes: 17 No: 11 Unsure: 2

2. Do you discuss your own textbook reading strategies with the students you tutor?
   Total responses: Yes: 23 No: 7 Unsure: 0

3. How often do students ask you to explain or clarify textbook material they are having difficulty with?
   Total responses: Rarely: 5 Occasionally: 15 Frequently: 10

4. In your opinion, do you believe that poor reading skills among the students you work with is:
   a. An infrequently encountered minor problem: total response: 13
   b. A regularly encountered somewhat important problem: total response: 17
   c. A frequently encountered severe problem: total response: 0

Part II

5. While attending college, have you actively sought out ways to improve your own reading skills?
   Total response: Yes: 23 No: 7 Unsure: 0

6. When reading a textbook, have you used context clues to find the meaning of an unknown word?
   Total response: Yes: 29 No: 1 Unsure: 0

7. Do you scan a textbook chapter completely before rereading it more carefully?
   Total response: Yes: 17 No: 12 Unsure: 1

8. When reading a textbook chapter, do you attempt to anticipate possible test questions based on the information in the text?
   Total response: Yes: 25 No: 3 Unsure: 2

PEER TUTOR READING SURVEY

Subject Area(s) tutored:_____

No. Semesters Employed:_____

Part I

1. Have you tutored students who, in your opinion, were having difficulty with course work caused by problems with reading comprehension?
   Yes___ No___ Unsure___

2. Do you discuss your own textbook reading strategies with the students you tutor?
   Yes___ No___ Unsure___

3. How often do students ask you to explain or clarify textbook material they are having difficulty with?
   Rarely___ Occasionally___ Frequently___

4. In your opinion, do you believe that poor reading skills among the students you work with is:
   a. an infrequently encountered minor problem.
   b. a regularly encountered somewhat important problem.
   c. a frequently encountered severe problem.

Part II

1. While attending college have you actively sought out ways to improve your own reading skills?
   Yes___ No___ Unsure___

2. When reading a textbook, do you use context clues to determine the meaning of an unknown word?
   Yes___ No___ Unsure___

3. Do you scan a textbook chapter completely before rereading it more carefully?
   Yes___ No___ Unsure___

4. When reading a textbook chapter, do you attempt to anticipate possible test questions based on the information in the text?
   Yes___ No___ Unsure___